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BUILDING CHARACTER

Characterization, Part I

♦ *The Direct Methods of Character Presentation*

Human character is in the foreground of all fiction, however the humanity might be disguised. Attributing human characteristics to the natural world may be frowned on in science, but it is a literary necessity. Bugs Bunny isn't a rabbit; he's a plucky youth in ears. Peter Rabbit is a mischievous boy. Brer Rabbit is a sassy rebel. The romantic heroes of *Watership Down* are out of the Arthurian tradition, not out of the hutch.

Your fiction can be only as successful as the characters who move it and move within it. Whether they are drawn from life or are pure fantasy—and all fictional characters lie somewhere between the two—we must find them interesting, we must find them believable, and we must care about what happens to them.

YOU ARE GOING TO LOVE SOME OF YOUR CHARACTERS, because they are you or some facet of you, and you are going to hate some of your characters for the same reason. But no matter what, you are probably going to have to let bad things happen to some of the characters you love or you won't have much of a story. Bad things happen to good characters, because our actions have consequences, and we do not all behave perfectly all the time.

ANNE LAMOTT

The Direct Methods of Character Presentation

There are six basic methods of character presentation. There are four direct methods—*dialogue*, *appearance*, *action*, and *thought*. Dialogue will be discussed in this chapter because it plays such an essential role in bringing characters to life. The other direct methods, along with the indirect methods—*authorial interpretation* and *interpretation by another character*—will be discussed in Chapter 4. Employing a variety of these methods can help you create full characters.

DIALOGUE

Speech characterizes in a way that is different from appearance, because speech represents an effort, mainly voluntary, to externalize the internal and to manifest not merely taste or preference but also deliberated thought. Like fiction itself, human dialogue attempts to marry logic to emotion.

Summary, Indirect, and Direct Dialogue. Speech can be conveyed in fiction with varying degrees of directness. It can be *summarized* as part of the narrative so that a good deal of conversation is condensed:

At home in the first few months, he and Maizie had talked brightly about changes that would make the company more profitable and more attractive to a prospective buyer: new cuts, new packaging, new advertising, new incentives to make supermarkets carry the brand.

Joan Wickersham, "Commuter Marriage"

It can be reported in the third person as *indirect speech* so that it carries, without actual quotation, the feel of the exchange:

Had he brought the coffee? She had been waiting all day long for coffee. They had forgot it when they ordered at the store the first day.

Gosh, no, he hadn't. Lord, now he'd have to go back. Yes, he would if it killed him. He thought, though, he had everything else. She reminded him it was only because he didn't drink coffee himself. If he did he would remember it quick enough.

Katherine Anne Porter, "Rope"

But usually when the exchange contains the possibility of discovery or decision, and therefore of dramatic action, it will be presented in *direct quotation*:

"But I thought you hardly knew her, Mr. Morning."

He picked up a pencil and began to doodle on a notebook page. "Did I tell you that?"

"Yes, you did."

"It's true. I didn't know her well."

"What is it you're after, then? Who was this person you're investigating?"

"I would like to know that too."

Siri Hustvedt, "Mr. Morning"

These three methods of presenting speech can be used in combination to take advantage of the virtues of each:

They differed on the issue of the holiday, and couldn't seem to find a common ground. (*Summary*.) She had an idea: why not some Caribbean island over Christmas? Well, but his mother expected them for turkey. (*Indirect*.)

"Oh, lord, yes, I wouldn't want to go without a yuletide gizzard." (*Direct*.)

Summary and indirect speech are often useful to get us quickly to the core of the scene, or when, for example, one character has to inform another of events that we already know, or when the emotional point of a conversation is that it has become tedious.

Carefully, playing down the danger, Len filled her in on the events of the long night.

Samantha claimed to be devastated. It was all very well if the Seversons wanted to let their cats run loose, but she certainly wasn't responsible for Lisbeth's parakeets, now was she?

But nothing is more frustrating to a reader than to be told that significant events are taking place in talk and to be denied the drama of the dialogue.

They whispered to each other all night long, and as he told her all about his past, she began to realize that she was falling in love with him.

Such a summary—it's *telling*—is a stingy way of treating the reader, who wants the chance to fall in love, too.

Economy in Dialogue. Because direct dialogue has a dual nature—emotion within a logical structure—its purpose in fiction is never merely to convey information. Dialogue may do that (although information often is more naturally conveyed in narration), but it needs simultaneously to characterize, provide exposition, set the scene, advance the action, foreshadow, and/or remind. William Sloane, in *The Craft of Writing*, says:

There is a tentative rule that pertains to all fiction dialogue. It must do more than one thing at a time or it is too inert for the purposes of fiction. This may sound harsh, but I consider it an essential discipline.

In considering Sloane's "tentative rule," I place the emphasis on *rule*. With dialogue as with significant detail, when you write you are constantly at pains to mean more than you say. If a significant detail must both call up a sense image and *mean*, then the character's words, which presumably mean something, should simultaneously suggest image, personality, or emotion.

Dialogue, therefore, is not simply transcribed speech, but distilled speech—the "filler" and inert small talk of real conversation is edited away, even as the weight of implication is increased. "You don't simply copy what you heard on the street," says fiction writer Alice LaPlante. "You want to make it *sound* natural, but that doesn't mean it *is* natural. It takes careful editing to create natural-sounding dialogue. Generally, that means keeping things brief, and paying attention to the rhythm of the sentences. Sentences are short. They're not particularly grammatically correct, but rather quirky and characteristic of the speaker."

As a general rule, distilling speech into dialogue means avoiding long monologues and keeping the sense of an exchange. A character who speaks several consecutive sentences might come across as either a windbag (which, of course, might be your intention) or the author's puppet. Often the first and last words, phrases, or sentences of a character's speech can be eliminated. In this way you are separating the wheat from the chaff. The characters' intentions and preoccupations can shine through because of the leaps they make in their dialogue and because of the spaces left within their dialogue. The things they can't bring themselves to say aloud are often as revealing, or more revealing, than those they do say.

Characterizing Dialogue. Even rote exchanges, however, can call up images. A character who says, "It is indeed a pleasure to meet you" carries his back at a different angle, dresses differently, from a character who says, "Hey, man, what's up?"

The three very brief speeches that follow portray three fictional men, sharply differentiated from each other not only by the content of what they say, but also by their diction (choice and use of words) and their syntax (the ordering of words in a sentence). Like appearance, these choices convey attributes of class, period, ethnicity, and so forth, as well as political or moral attitudes. How much do you know about each? How does each look?

"I had a female cousin one time—a Rockefeller, as it happened—" said the Senator, "and she confessed to me that she spent the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth years of her life saying nothing but, No, thank you. Which is all very well for a girl of that age and station. But it would have been a damned unattractive trait in a male Rockefeller."

Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*

"You think you the only one ever felt this way?" he asked. "You think I never felt this way? You think she never felt this way? Every last one of them back there one time in they life wanted to give up. She want to give up now. You know that? You got any idea how sick she is? Soon after he go, she's going too. I won't give her another year. I want her to believe he'll be up there waiting for her. And you can help me do it. And you the only one."

Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

The Knight looked surprised at the question. "What does it matter where my body happens to be?" he said. "My mind goes on working all the same. In fact, the more head downward I am, the more I keep inventing new things.

"Now, the cleverest thing of the sort that I ever did," he went on after a pause, "was inventing a new pudding during the meat course."

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

There are forms of insanity that condemn people to hear voices against their will, but as writers we invite ourselves to hear voices without relinquishing our hold on reality or our right to control. The trick to writing good dialogue is hearing voice. The question is, what would he or she say? The answer is entirely in language. The choice of language reveals content, character, and conflict, as well as type.

It's logical that if you must develop voices in order to develop dialogue, you'd do well to start with monologue and develop voices one by one. Use your journal to experiment with speech patterns that will characterize. Some people speak in telegraphically short sentences missing various parts of speech. Some speak in convoluted eloquence or in rhythms tedious with qualifying phrases. Some rush headlong without a pause for breath until they're breathless; others are measured or terse or begrudge even forming a sentence. Trust your "inner ear" and use your journal to practice catching voices. Freewriting is invaluable to dialogue writing because it is the manner of composition closest to speech. There is no time to mull or edit. Any qualifications, corrections, and disavowals must be made part of the process and the text.

To increase your ability to "hear" dialogue, try carrying a small pocket notebook with you and noting vivid lines or exchanges of eavesdropped dialogue verbatim. At home, look back through your notebook for speech that interests you and freedraft a monologue passage of that speech in your writing journal. Don't look for words that seem right; just listen to the voice and let it flow. You'll begin to develop your own range of voices whether you catch a particular voice or not, and may even develop your ear by the very process of "hearing" it go wrong at times.

Other Uses of Dialogue. You can also limber up in your journal by setting yourself deliberate exercises in making dialogue—or monologue—do more than one thing at a time. In addition to revealing character, dialogue can *set the scene*.

"We didn't know no one was here. We thought hit a summer camp all closed up. Curtains all closed up. Nothing here. No cars or gear nor nothing. Looks closed to me, don't hit to you, J.J.?"

Joy Williams, "Woods"

Dialogue can *set the mood*.

"I have a lousy trip to Philadelphia, lousy flight back, I watch my own plane blow a tire on closed-circuit TV, I go to my office, I find Suzy in tears because Warren's camped in her one-room apartment. I come home and I find my wife hasn't gotten dressed in two days."

Joan Didion, *Book of Common Prayer*

Dialogue can *reveal the theme* because, as William Sloane says, the characters talk about what the story is about.

"You feel trapped, don't you?"

Jane looks at her.

"Don't you?"

"No."

"O.K.—You just have a headache."

"I do." . . .

Milly waits a moment and then clears her throat and says, "You know, for a while there after Wally and I were married, I thought maybe I'd made a mistake. I remember realizing that I didn't like the way he laughed. I mean, let's face it, Wally laughs like a hyena. . . ."

Richard Bausch, "The Fireman's Wife"

In all of the preceding passages, the dialogue fulfills Sloane's rule because in addition to conveying its content, the dialogue either moves the story forward or enriches our understanding.

Dialogue is also one of the simplest ways to *reveal the past* (a fundamental playwriting device is to have a character who knows tell a character who doesn't know); and it is one of the most effective, because we get both the drama of the memory and the drama of the telling. Here is a passage from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in which the past is evoked, the speaker characterized, the scene and mood set, and the theme revealed, all at the same time and in less than a dozen lines.

"The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They'd cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. I don't know."

Be careful, however, that you don't succumb to the temptation to slip exposition into dialogue by allowing the characters to discuss things they both already know just for the reader's benefit.

"I've missed you so much, Margie! It's been over a month since we ran into each other at the Farmer's Market. That was the day you told me that your grandson Eddie got into Julliard!"

"Yes, Suzie, and wasn't that right before the tornado came through town? We were so scared when that siren went off! Remember how we hid underneath the rickety table with the watermelons on it?"

This kind of dialogue is both ridiculous and tedious. If we really need to know about the Farmer's Market and Eddie and the tornado, tell us in exposition. Don't weigh your characters' dialogue down with such information.

Dialogue as Action. If the telling of a memory *changes the relationship* between the teller and the listener, then you have a scene of high drama, and the dialogue can *advance the action*.

This is an important device, because dialogue is most valuable to fiction when it is itself a means of telling the story.

In the following passage, for example, the mother of a seriously ill toddler looks anxiously to a radiologist for information:

"The surgeon will speak to you," says the Radiologist.

"Are you finding something?"

"The surgeon will speak to you," the Radiologist says again. "There seems to be something there, but the surgeon will talk to you about it."

"My uncle once had something on his kidney," says the Mother. "So they removed the kidney and it turned out the something was benign."

The Radiologist smiles a broad, ominous smile. "That's always the way it is," he says. "You don't know exactly what it is until it's in the bucket."

"In the bucket," the Mother repeats.

"That's doctor talk," the Radiologist says.

"It's very appealing," says the Mother. "It's a very appealing way to talk."

Lorrie Moore, "People Like That Are the Only People Here"

Here the radiologist's speech alters the mother's feeling toward him from hopeful to hostile in one short exchange. The level of fear for the child rises, and the dialogue itself has effected change.

A crucial (and sometimes difficult) distinction to make is between speech that is mere discussion or debate and speech that is drama or action. If in doubt, ask yourself: Can this conversation between characters really change anything? *Dialogue is action when it contains the possibility of change.* When two characters have made up their minds and know each other's positions on some political or philosophical matter, for instance, they may argue with splendid eloquence but there will be no discovery and nothing to decide, and therefore no option for change. No matter how significant their topic, we are likely to find them wooden and uninteresting. The story's question *what happened next?* will suggest only *more talk*:

"This has been the traditional fishing spot of the river people for a thousand years, and we have a moral responsibility to aid them in preserving their way of life. If you put in these rigs, it may undermine the ecosystem and destroy the aquifer of the entire county!"

"Join the real world, Sybil. Free enterprise is based on this kind of technological progress, and without it we would endanger the economic base."

Ho-hum. In order to engage us emotionally in a disagreement, the characters must have an emotional stake in the outcome; we need to feel that, even if it's unlikely they would change their minds, they might change their lives.

"If you sink that drill tomorrow morning, I'll be gone by noon."
"Sybil, I have no choice."

Further, if you find your characters getting stuck in a repetitive conflict ("yes-you-are, no-I'm-not"), you can jump-start the action if you remember that people generally change their tactics—become charming, threatening, seductive, guilt-inducing, and so on—when they are not succeeding in getting what they badly want. And if *each* character in the scene wants something from the other, although it probably won't be the same thing, the momentum will build. It's much harder (although not impossible) to maintain dramatic energy when one of the characters simply wants to get off stage.

Text and Subtext. Often the most forceful dialogue can be achieved by not having the characters say what they mean. People in extreme emotional states—whether of fear, pain, anger, or love—are at their least articulate. There is more narrative tension in a love scene where the lovers make anxious small talk, terrified of revealing their feelings, than in one where they hop into bed.

A character who is able to say "I hate you!" hates less than one who bottles the fury and pretends to submit, unwilling to expose the truth.

Dialogue can fall flat if characters define their feelings too precisely and honestly, because often the purpose of human exchange is to conceal as well as to reveal—to impress, hurt, protect, seduce, or reject. Anton Chekhov believed that a line of dialogue should always leave the sense that more could have been said. Playwright David Mamet suggests that people may or may not say what they mean, but always say something designed to get what they want.

In this example from Alice Munro's "Before the Change," the daughter of a doctor who performed illegal abortions up until his recent death takes a phone call:

A woman on the phone wants to speak to the doctor.

"I'm sorry. He's dead."

"Dr. Strachan. Have I got the right doctor?"

"Yes but I'm sorry, he's dead."

"Is there anyone—does he by any chance have a partner I could talk to? Is there anybody else there?"

"No. No partner."

"Could you give me any other number I could call? Isn't there some other doctor that can—"

"No. I haven't any number. There isn't anybody that I know of."

"You must know what this is about. It's very crucial. There are very special circumstances—"

"I'm sorry."

It's clear here that neither woman is willing to mention abortion, and that the daughter will also not (and probably could not) speak about her complicated feelings toward her father and his profession. The exchange is rich with irony in that both women and also the reader know the "special circumstance" they are guardedly referring to; only the daughter and the reader are privy to the events surrounding the doctor's death and to the daughter's feelings.

Notice that this is not a very articulate exchange, but it does represent dramatic action, because for both women the stakes are high; they are both emotionally involved, but in ways that put them at cross-purposes.

In "Following the Notes" by Pia Z. Ehrhardt (included at the end of this chapter) a high school-age daughter has summoned her father to her place of work because her car battery is dead, but she slips up and reveals more to him than she means to. Her subterfuge and his understanding of it are both lurking in and between the lines of their exchange:

"You left the headlights on?" he said.

"The passenger light," I said, pointing at the back seat. "Door wasn't shut all the way."

"Who was in the back?" he said. "I thought you were driving to work and home, only."

My daily comings and goings were charted in the kitchen, reviewed when I got back in the evening. I had the use of a Buick Century as long as I kept it filled with gas, washed it once a week in our driveway with mild detergent, and didn't joy ride with my friends.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," I said

"Don't be a smart-ass."

The idea of "reading between the lines" of dialogue is familiar to most people, for in life we tend to react more to what is implied in dialogue than to what is actually said. The linkage of text and subtext—that is, the surface, plot-related dialogue and its emotional undercurrent—was famously described by Ernest Hemingway with the analogy of an iceberg: "There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show."

When an unspoken subject remains unspoken, tension continues to build in a story. Often the crisis of a story occurs when the unspoken tension comes to the surface and an explosion results. "If you're trying to build pressure, don't take the lid off the pot," Jerome Stern suggests in his book *Making Shapely Fiction*. "Once people are really candid, once the unstated becomes stated, the tension is released and the effect is cathartic.... [Y]ou want to give yourself the space for a major scene. Here you do want to describe setting and action vividly, and render what they say fully. You've taken the lid off the pot and we want to feel the dialogue boil over."

IF YOU TAKE TWO STICKS AND HOLD THEM PARALLEL, you can capture that image in a photograph because it doesn't change. But if you rub those two sticks together, harder and harder, faster and faster, they will burst into flame—that's the kind of change you can capture in a story or on film. Friction is necessary for change to occur. But without the friction of conflict, there is no change. And without change, there is no story. A body at rest remains at rest unless it enters into conflict.

STEPHEN FISCHER

"No" Dialogue. The previous Munro passage (page 81) also illustrates an essential element of conflict in dialogue: Tension and drama are heightened when characters are constantly (in one form or another) saying no to each other. In the following exchange from Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the

old man feels only love for his young protégé, and their conversation is a pledge of affection. Nevertheless, it is the old man's steady denial that lends the scene tension.

"Can I go out and get sardines for you tomorrow?"

"No. Go and play baseball. I can still row and Rogelio will throw the net."

"I would like to go. If I cannot fish with you, I would like to serve in some way."

"You brought me a beer," the old man said. "You are already a man."

"How old was I when you first took me in a boat?"

"Five and you were nearly killed when I brought the fish in too green and he nearly tore the boat to pieces. Can you remember?"

"I can remember the tail slapping and banging and the thwart breaking and the noise of the clubbing. I can remember you throwing me into the bow where the wet coiled lines were and feeling the whole boat shiver and the noise of you clubbing him like chopping a tree down and the sweet blood smell all over me."

"Can you really remember that or did I just tell it to you?"

"I remember everything from when we first went together."

The old man looked at him with his sunburned, confident loving eyes.

"If you were my boy I'd take you out and gamble," he said. "But you are your father's and mother's and you are in a lucky boat."

Neither of these characters is consciously eloquent, and the dialogue is extremely simple. But look how much more it does than "one thing at a time"! It provides exposition on the beginning of the relationship, and it conveys the mutual affection of the two and the conflict within the old man between his love for the boy and his loyalty to the parents. It conveys the boy's eagerness to persuade and carries him into the emotion he had as a small child while the fish was clubbed. The dialogue represents a constant shift of power back and forth between the boy and the old man, as the boy, whatever else he is saying, continues to say *please*, and the old man, whatever else he is saying, continues to say *no*.

Another Hemingway story, "Hills Like White Elephants," also offers clear examples of "no" dialogue. Notice, however, that the conflict does not simply get stuck in a rut, because the characters continue to find new ways to ask and answer the questions as each tries to find the other's vulnerable points.

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

"It's pretty hot," the man said.

"Let's drink beer."

"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.

"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Two big ones."

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it," she said. "What does it say?"

Specificity. In dialogue, as in narrative, we will tend to believe a character who speaks in concrete details and to be skeptical of one who generalizes or who delivers judgments unsupported by example. When the boy in the Hemingway passage protests, "I remember everything," we believe him because of the vivid details in his memory of the fish. If one character says, "It's perfectly clear from all his actions that he adores me and would do anything for me," and another says, "I had my hands all covered with the clay slick, and he just reached over to lift a lock of hair out of my eyes and tuck it behind my ear," which character do you believe is the more loved?

Similarly, in conflict dialogue, "details are the rocks characters throw at each other," says Stephen Fischer. Our memories for hurts and slights are sadly long, and an accusation that begins as a general blame—"You never think of my feelings"—is likely to be backed up with specific proof as the argument escalates—"You said you'd pick me up at seven New Year's Eve, but you left me waiting for an hour in the snow." "There's nothing generic in our lives," Fischer explains, "and the sparks given off in conflict may reveal all the facts we need to know about the characters."

It's interesting to observe that whereas in narrative you will demonstrate control if you state the facts and let the emotional value rise off of them, in dialogue you will convey information more naturally if the emphasis is on the speaker's feelings. "My brother is due to arrive at midafternoon and is bringing his four children with him" reads as bald exposition; whereas, "That idiot brother of mine thinks he can walk in in the middle of the afternoon and plunk his four kids in my lap!" or, "I can't wait till my brother gets here at three! You'll see—those are the four sweetest kids this side of the planet"—will sound like talk and will slip us the information sideways.

Examine your dialogue to see if it does more than one thing at a time. Do the sound and syntax characterize by region, education, attitude? Do the choice of words and their syntax reveal that the character is stiff, outgoing, stifling anger, ignorant of the facts, perceptive, bigoted, afraid? Is the conflict advanced

by "no" dialogue, in which the characters say no to each other in different ways? Is the drama heightened by the characters' inability or unwillingness to tell the whole truth?

Once you are comfortable with the voice of your character, it is well to acknowledge that everyone has many voices and that what that character says will be, within his or her verbal range, determined by the character to whom it is said. All of us have one sort of speech for the vicar and another for the man who pumps the gas. Huck Finn, whose voice is idiosyncratically his own, says, "Yes, sir" to the judge and "Maybe I am, maybe I ain't" to his degenerate dad.

Pacing. Economy in dialogue—distilling it, avoiding the rehash of what the reader already knows, making sure that it does more than one job at a time—is an important part of pacing. At the same time, it's important not to hurry over the unfolding drama that takes place in an exchange of speech.

One reason why readers enjoy dialogue is that it's the most direct experience of the characters we get in fiction, the only time they express themselves without any authorial interference. Therefore, it's important, when writing dialogue, not to race through it quickly with an end in mind. You might think you know what the outcome of a conversation is going to be, but dialogue is always more fun to write, and to read, if the characters surprise you. When writing dialogue take your time and listen closely to what your characters might say, based on who they are and what they want, rather than foisting your own agenda on them.

For instance, you may begin writing a scene with a plan to get in and out quickly. You may decide that this will be the scene where he breaks up with her.

"I've stopped by to tell you that it's over. I've had enough. We're finished."

"Fine. There's the door. Goodbye."

This quick exchange wouldn't allow you to discover the depth of the characters, with the consequence that the reader is cheated of the real drama. The characters come off sounding flat and unreal, whereas if you're aware as you're writing that both characters have their own desires and conflicting emotions, if you allow them to reveal some of their feelings and hide others, they will become authentic and believable. The subtext will be revealed. In a situation like this, it's important to remember that the character being abandoned is not a passive sounding board or a mere echo.

"You still need to fix that porch light. Wow, don't you look nice."

"I've got three minutes to get downtown. Jake's waiting for me. What's up?"

This dialogue is more specific and the characters are at odds, but what exactly is going to happen isn't clear. He's trying to be nonchalant, a little bit

aggressive but still kind; she seems to know why he's come and has already found someone else. Or at least wants him to think so. What if he insists on coming in for three minutes? This scene wants to be longer. Keep the talkers talking. Maybe they won't break up after all—not tonight, anyway.

There are additional ways to pace yourself when writing dialogue. Timing, as it is in stand-up comedy, is crucial. Vary your sentences and the placement of your dialogue tags. Decide where you want the reader to pause, what you want to emphasize.

In this excerpt from Tobias Wolff's "Hunters in the Snow," Wolff structures the paragraph so that the reader gets the full benefit of Frank's zinger.

Frank had his fingers fanned out, tips against the bark of the stump where he'd laid his foot. His knuckles were hairy. He wore a heavy wedding band and on his right pinky another gold ring with a flat face and an "F" in what looked like diamonds. He turned the ring this way and that. "Tub," he said, "you haven't seen your own balls in years."

In Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," the silences and interruptions say as much about the characters and their conflict as their words do.

"I don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do—"

"Nor that isn't good for me," she said. "I know. Could we have another beer?"

"All right, but you've got to realize—"

"I realize," said the girl. "Can't we maybe stop talking?"

Repetition is another way to vary pace and emphasize certain words and emotions. It becomes clear that the wife in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" worries that her guest, Robert, the blind man, will sense her husband's hostility. The husband, who is the narrator, is listening to this exchange, which is really directed at him.

My wife covered her mouth, and then she yawned. She stretched. She said, "I think I'll go upstairs and put on my robe. I think I'll change into something else. Robert, you make yourself comfortable," she said.

"I'm comfortable," the blind man said.

"I want you to feel comfortable in this house," she said.

"I am comfortable," the blind man said.

With each repetition the word *comfortable* takes on a slightly different meaning.

Fiction writers generally manage the pace of a scene by blending dialogue with description, action, and the main character's thoughts. These are also direct ways to present character and will be discussed in the next chapter.

Format and Style. The *format and style of dialogue*, like punctuation, has as its goal to be invisible; and though there may be occasions when departing from the rules is justified by some special effect, it's best to consider such occasions rare. Here are some basic guidelines:

What a character says aloud should be in quotation marks; thoughts should not. This helps clearly differentiate between the spoken and the internal, especially by acknowledging that speech is more deliberately formulated. If you feel that thoughts need to be set apart from narrative, use italics instead of quotation marks.

Begin the dialogue of each new speaker as a new paragraph. This helps orient the reader and keep clear who is speaking. If an action is described between the dialogue lines of two speakers, put that action in the paragraph of the speaker it describes:

"I wish I'd taken that picture." Larry traced the horizon with his index finger.

Janice snatched the portfolio away. "You've got chicken grease on your hands," she said, "and this is the only copy!"

Notice that the punctuation goes inside the quotation marks.

A dialogue tag tells us who has spoken—*John said, Mary said, Tim announced*. When a tag is used, it is connected to the dialogue line with a comma, even though the dialogue line may sound like a full sentence: "*I'm paying tonight,*" *Mary said*. (Misusing a period in place of the comma with a tag is one of the most common mistakes in dialogue format.)

Avoid over-using the name of the person being spoken to in dialogue—it doesn't sound conversational.

"For God sake, Benji, my job's more important than our marathon Monopoly game."

"Ah, Mom, you're always taking things the wrong way."

"Benji, you know that's not true."

"Yup, true, Mom, every time."

Like a luggage tag or a nametag, a dialogue tag is for the purpose of identification, and *said* is usually adequate to the task. People also *ask* and *reply* and occasionally *add*, *recall*, *remember*, or *remind*. But sometimes an unsure writer will strain for emphatic synonyms: *She gasped, he whined, they chorused, John snarled, Mary spat*. This is unnecessary and obtrusive, because although unintentional repetition usually makes for awkward style, the word *said* is as invisible as punctuation. When reading we're scarcely aware of it, whereas we are forced to be aware of *she wailed*. If it's clear who is speaking without any dialogue tag at all, don't use one. Usually an identification at the beginning of a dialogue passage and an occasional reminder are sufficient. If the speaker is inherently identified in the speech pattern, so much the better.

Similarly, tonal dialogue tags should be used sparingly: *he said with relish*; *she added limply*. Such phrases are blatant “telling,” and the chances are that good dialogue will convey its own tone. “*Get off my case!*” *she said angrily*. We do not need to be told that she said this angrily. If she said it sweetly, then we would probably need to be told. If the dialogue does not give us a clue to the manner in which it is said, an action will often do so better than an adverb. “*I’ll have a word with Mr. Ritter about it,*” *he said with finality* is weaker than “*I’ll have a word with Mr. Ritter about it,*” *he said, and picked up his hat.*

It helps to make the dialogue tag unobtrusive if it comes within the spoken line: “*Don’t give it a second thought,*” *he said. “I was just going anyway.”* (A midline tag has the added benefit of helping readers hear a slight pause or change in the speaker’s inflection.) A tag that comes at the beginning of the line may look too much like a play script: *He said, “Don’t give it a second thought . . .”* whereas a tag that comes after too much speech becomes confusing or superfluous: “*Don’t give it a second thought. I was going anyway, and I’ll just take these and drop them at the copy shop on the way,*” *he said.* If we didn’t know who was speaking long before this tag appears, it’s too late to be of use and simply calls attention to itself.

Vernacular. Vernacular is a tempting, and can be an excellent, means of characterizing, but it is difficult to do well and easy to overdo. Dialect, regionality, and childhood should be achieved by word choice and syntax. Misspellings should be kept to a minimum because they distract and slow the reader, and worse, they tend to make the character seem stupid. There is no point in spelling phonetically any word as it is ordinarily pronounced: Almost all of us say things like “fur” for *for*, “uv” for *of*, “wuz” for *was*, “an” for *and*, and “sez” for *says*. It’s common to drop the *g* in words ending in *ing*. When you misspell these words in dialogue, you indicate that the speaker is ignorant enough to spell them that way when writing. Even if you want to indicate ignorance, you may alienate the reader by the means you choose to do so. John Updike puts this point well when he complains of a Tom Wolfe character:

[His] pronunciations are steadfastly spelled out—‘sump’m’ for ‘something,’ ‘far fat’ for ‘fire fight’—in a way that a Faulkner character would be spared. For Faulkner, Southern life was life; for Wolfe it is a provincial curiosity. . . .

It is largely to avoid the charge of creating “provincial curiosities” that most fiction writers now avoid misspellings.

It can be even trickier catching the voice of a foreigner with imperfect English, because everyone has a native language, and when someone whose native language is French or Ibu starts to learn English, the grammatical mistakes they make will be based on the grammatical structure of the native language. Unless you know French or Ibu, you will make mistakes, and your dialogue is likely to sound as if it came from second-rate sitcoms.

In vernacular or standard English, the bottom-line rule is that dialogue must be speakable. If it isn’t speakable, it isn’t dialogue.

“Certainly I had had a fright I wouldn’t soon forget,” Reese would say later, “and as I slipped into bed fully dressed except for my shoes, which I flung God-knows-where, I wondered why I had subjected myself to a danger only a fool would fail to foresee for the dubious pleasure of spending one evening in the company of a somewhat less than brilliant coed.”

Nobody would say this because it can’t be said. It is not only convoluted beyond reason but it also stumbles over its alliteration, “only a fool would fail to foresee for,” and takes more breath than the human lungs can hold.

Read your dialogue aloud and make sure it is comfortable to the mouth, the breath, and the ear. False, flabby, do-nothing dialogue will reveal itself, as will places that drag or seem rushed. This is the best way possible to tell if it’s all coming together.

DIALOGUE TIPS

1. Have your characters speak no more than three sentences at a time—unless you have a good reason to do otherwise.
2. Dialogue is more interesting when characters are saying no to each other.
3. Keep exposition out of dialogue
4. Let your characters sometimes conceal or avoid instead of saying exactly what they mean.
5. Use “said” as a dialogue tag whenever possible.
6. Use an action rather than a modifier to show how a character is feeling.
7. Cut to the chase. Don’t use dialogue that doesn’t move the story forward and reveal character.
8. Don’t let your characters be too articulate. Fragments are fine. Don’t force conversations to follow a logical order (question followed by answer). No need to stay on the same subject or include clear transitions from one subject to another.
9. Vernacular is best conveyed by word choice and syntax as opposed to misspellings.